

WHY CHOOSE

SEPARATION?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Many people with disabilities are SEPARATE. I wish it wasn't so. I'm ready for unity and togetherness and inclusion. I'm ready for all people, regardless of disability type, to be seen—and to see themselves—as part of the whole: the whole universe, the whole world, the whole human race, and the whole enchilada!

Many other people feel the same way. Some, however, might also add that people with disabilities won't be part of the whole until society changes. And I agree, up to a point. Yes, when societal attitudes change, when language changes, when social policies change, and when people's hearts are changed, things will be better. But do we think society will change on its own? It won't. It never has; it never will!

But to place all the blame on society is to forget that *we*—people with disabilities, family members, and others who care about people with disabilities—are part of the society that has *created* SEPARATION. Some of us even *contribute* to SEPARATION when we *choose* to separate ourselves through language, actions, or both.

"Julia" doesn't think People First Language is important. She uses "retarded...Downs' kid...can't talk...low functioning...behavior problems" when speaking about her son. And she wonders why others think her son "is strange" and "doesn't belong." *Duh!*

Julia thinks she's being helpful by "explaining" about her son's condition. But she doesn't receive the understanding she's seeking. Instead, her language generates the opposite of understanding: fear,

prejudice, and pity. Julia is inadvertently choosing SEPARATION through her language.

But what if she uses different language? If Julia describes Stephen's *strengths* ("He loves to swim, he's learning how to cook, and he really likes to be helpful."), and Stephen's *needs* ("He'll need a little support to stay on track, and his speech is sometimes difficult to understand, so he needs you to listen carefully and let him know if you don't understand.") in positive, dignified, respectful terms, others will see Stephen as the wonderful boy he truly is.

"Tom" also chooses SEPARATION. As the father of "Amber," Tom is a strong advocate, he's learned a great deal about Amber's disability (autism), and he's focused on treatments and cures to make his daughter "normal."

He passionately believes, "Autistics are in their *own world*, and they're very different—not only from 'neuro-typical' kids, but they're very different from children with other disabilities." As a result of Tom's beliefs, he and his family have cut themselves off from friends and neighbors, *and* from parents of children

with other types of disabilities. Tom and his wife associate only with parents whose children have autism. He doesn't realize his actions have landed his family members in *their* own world."

"Dawn" chooses SEPARATION in a similar fashion. "I'm Deaf," she says, "with a capital 'D.' Being Deaf isn't a disability, it's just a different way of communicating."

***The opposite of choosing SEPARATION
is choosing To BELONG.***

2 - Why Choose Separation?

People who are familiar with my work know that I'm trying to create positive change in attitudes and perceptions about individuals who have what the sociopolitical arena has defined as "disabilities." To that end, I teach that a disability can be redefined as a "body part that works differently." So I'm "with" Dawn, up to a point. But Dawn, and others who think like her, seem to distance themselves from the *majority* of people with disabilities. Specifically, they apparently believe they have nothing in common with people who have physical, cognitive, or other types of disabilities/conditions.

I'm the first one to agree that people with disabilities do *not* constitute a single homogenous group. At the same time, there *are* times when people who share similar circumstances and experiences—like being on the receiving end of prejudice, misunderstanding, marginalization, and devaluation—can benefit from being in solidarity with each other around social and legal issues, and they can learn from one another, irrespective of disability type!

When we choose SEPARATION, many opportunities are lost. We lose opportunities to meet others and learn from them. We lose opportunities to *influence* the Real World. And, worst of all, we often sever opportunities to *participate in* the Real World.

Over the years, I've come to believe that the world we *see* is simply a reflection of ourselves. If we *believe* we're different, we may consciously or unconsciously say or do things that cause people to *see us* as different. It's possible, however, that some people may *not* actually see or treat us differently, but because we *think* they will, we interpret their behavior to suit our preconceived notions. In this way, we're no different from those we're trying to influence: people who can't see the real person behind the disability because *their* vision is clouded with preconceived notions.

The opposite of choosing SEPARATION is choosing *TO BELONG*. And choosing *TO BELONG* is easier than you might think!

Use People First Language: Rid your thoughts and vocabulary of words that focus on a person's diagnosis or perceived deficits, and which include stereotypes or medical jargon. Think and speak in ways that promote a person's strengths, gifts, and abilities. Reframe "problems" into "needs." I don't say my son "can't walk," I say, "My son needs/uses a wheelchair." (See the article "The Problem with 'Problem'.") When/if you need to discuss a person's needs, do so in ways that promote dignity and respect.

Become Normal—Typical—Average: See yourself as, and become, a "regular"—not a "special"—person/family. When we see ourselves as "special/different/pitiful" or whatever, others will see us that way, too—and exclusion/social isolation is the outcome!

Expect Inclusion: Inclusion is, first and foremost, *a state of mind*. See yourself and/or your family members as citizens of your community who belong!

Join the Real World: "Disability World"—special services and/or segregation (including groups we join)—can be a place *to visit* now and then, but it's not the Real World! Connect with people/groups with whom you and your family share similar interests. Yes, in joining a "disability group," you're with others who share a common interest. But if this involvement increases SEPARATION, it's not a healthy situation for you or your family. So get involved in ordinary community activities!

Our beliefs direct our actions. So *believe* you're included, *believe* you're part of your community, *believe* you're part of the Real World, and the actions to make it a reality will follow.

I want to change The World. But I can't. It's too big. I can, however, effect change in *My World*, which includes myself, my family, my neighborhood, my community, and others in my sphere of influence. When enough of us influence our individual worlds, the bigger World *will* be changed, and the SEPARATION of people with disabilities will become a distant nightmare.